

RUBY BRAFF AND ELLIS LARKINS DUETS



Calling Berlin VOL. 1



*Ruby Braff and Ellis Larkins: Calling Berlin, Vol. 1* ARCD 19139

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- Stanley Dance, author of *The World of Swing*

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Words and music for all selections by Irving Berlin

Ruby Braff: Cornet
Ellis Larkins: Piano

* Joined by Bucky Pizzarelli

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Commentary by Stanley Dance
November, 1994

The two resolute undercover agents shown in the photograph that illustrates this collection were not, as you may have assumed, engaged in ensuring the downfall of the Third Reich. They were, in fact, paying tribute to Berlin, to the great American songwriter, Irving Berlin, whose songs they intended recording that day. Given his enormous output, it was a serious business deciding which of his compositions should receive their attention. Hence their gravity and concentration.

Ruby Braff and Ellis Larkins first recorded together in 1955, when they made a couple of albums for Vanguard. They got together again in 1972 for another on the Chiaroscuro label. Now here they are once more, twenty-two years later, still going strong like Scotland's famous Johnny Walker.

The original inspiration for their getting together was an album of Gershwin songs Ella Fitzgerald and Ellis Larkins made for Decca in 1954. It impressed everyone — musicians, critics and audience alike

— not only for the grace and authority of the singing but also for the piano accompaniment, which Alec Wilder described in *DownBeat* as “his infinitely fine musical embroidery.” Their album was an artistic success and a kind of prototype for the singer's later immensely successful series of Songbooks, each devoted to the work of a different composer.

Among the musicians impressed was Ruby Braff. When the present project became imminent, he insisted that it be dedicated to Ella Fitzgerald, and he wrote her a special letter of appreciation, which said in part:

“I don't remember a time in my life when I wasn't entertained and moved by your singing. In the early '50s, I was asked to make another quartet record, but I told John Hammond that I wanted to make one with Ellis Larkins because of his recording with you.”

It was typical of Braff, one of whose albums was once magically entitled “Adoration of the Melody,” that he selected Irving Berlin as his composer of choice for their album, since Braff likes melodies and has a high regard for those who make and shape them. “If a pretty melody doesn't tug at your heart strings,” he says, “you shouldn't be playing music.”

Now it is a strange fact that composers who have contributed greatly to the jazz repertoire are, with the exception of George Gershwin and jazzmen like Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, seldom mentioned in books about jazz. You can look in vain in the usual jazz references — even in the new jazz *Grove* — for a separate entry on Irving Berlin. Yet his is an astonishing story (very well told in Lawrence Bergreen's biographical *As Thousands Cheer*) and his music has served countless jazz musicians admirably. Besides very familiar titles like **“Blue Skies,”** **“Alexander's Ragtime Band,”** **“Russian Lullaby”** and **“Easter Parade”** there are others here one may remember as having been recorded by great jazz artists, and still others one may never have heard before, that are all recognizably worthy of our duettists.

They begin appropriately enough with **“It's A Lovely Day Today”** from the 1950 Broadway musical *Call Me Madam* on which they get a helping boost from Bucky Pizzarelli's guitar rhythm.

“Blue Skies” (1927) and Berlin's first sensational hit, **“Alexander's Ragtime Band”** (1911), have both been the vehicles for numerous jazz recordings, in the first case by the likes of Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Art Tatum. The second, stylistically more dated, was recorded by Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman, among others.

However venerable the numbers, the treatment is invariably fresh, spontaneous and joyful. Braff, who sometimes describes himself as “an instrumental dramatist of American song,” very quickly shows why, and Larkins is as quick in throwing up ideas to supplement his partner's and to suggest further avenues to explore. “He has an unusual way of shading the chords,” Braff says, “and he knows how to keep things moving underneath you.” That is why he became — and remains — the favorite of so many great singers. What strengthens his rapport with Braff is their mutual feeling about melody. “I never lose the melody when I play solo,” Larkins says in Whitney Balliett's *American Musicians*. “I give the melody at the beginning of a song and at the end. In between, when I improvise, I make little melodies of my own, and it becomes a way of expressing myself, of improving the original — you hope.” Then he went on, elaborating: “Three things go on in my head when I solo; the melody and the lyrics, which I say to myself as I go along; and a kind of imaginary big band, which directs the voicings — the chords I play — so that some will resemble the reed section and some the brass.” This, in other words, amounts to much more than exercises on the chord structure improvised by those who couldn't care less about the song's original melody or the significance of its lyrics.

The duo has its own ideas about appropriate tempos, too. Thus **“Blue Skies”** and **“Russian Lullaby”** are slightly slower than cus-

tom might dictate, and the better for it. Bucky Pizzarelli returns on the latter with a solo whose balalaika echoes enhance the basically nocturnal mood of a number by a composer who left Russia as a very young child. The "instrumental dramatist" is much in evidence, expectedly on "**How Deep Is The Ocean**" and rather surprisingly on "**Let's Face The Music And Dance.**" There are also affectionate greetings to Louis Armstrong on two songs he recorded: "**I'm Putting All My Eggs In One Basket**" and "**My Walking Stick.**"

Armstrong's is a name that happens in conversation with Ruby Braff as often as those of Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington, and if it hadn't been for Armstrong he might not have been playing with such power and glory on these sessions. In March 1994, he had been seriously ill and was languishing despondently in a Cape Cod hospital when his friend Jack Bradley came by and played him a tape of Armstrong's recordings. If not instantaneous, the curative effect was nevertheless beyond medical explanation.

Although our murderous twentieth century may be historically irredeemable, the unique gifts of people so various as Irving Berlin, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and our duettists are among those that have alleviated its horrors for many.

- Stanley Dance
author of *The World of Swing*

THE CREDITS

Producer:	Arbors Records, Inc.
Executive Producers:	Rachel and Mat Domber
Recorded:	Clinton Studios, New York City, June 28 - July 1, 1994
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